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THE MISSING MANUSCRIPT OF ROBERT BURNS'S "PATRIARCH" LETTER¹

Gerard Carruthers & Pauline Mackay

In *Studies in Scottish Literature* 38, Patrick Scott discussed a previously-unrecorded early printed source for the letter Robert Burns wrote on May 4, 1788 to his uncle Samuel Brown, the "Patriarch" letter, about his marriage, growing family, and move to Ellisland, and commented on the uncertain provenance of other sources for the letter.² As Scott pointed out, no manuscript is known in Burns's hand, and even the non-authorial transcripts on which earlier editors relied seemed to have vanished. This note is to report the recent discovery in Dumfries of a significant early manuscript transcript, unknown to Scott, and to explore its relation to the previous evidence about Burns's letter.³

The Dumfries manuscript is not in Burns's own hand and cannot be precisely dated, but it is written on what is clearly nineteenth-century paper, and small variations in the heading, dating and address suggest it preserves a very early form of the text. These are elements in a letter-text that transcribers and editors routinely standardize or omit, so that their

¹ Research for this short article was undertaken in the context of the search for manuscript material for the Arts & Humanities Research Council project "Editing Robert Burns for the 21st Century." The authors are grateful for AHRC funding, which is enabling the uncovering of background and second phase material as they work towards editions of the songs for the Oxford University Press *Works of Robert Burns*.

² G. Ross Roy, ed., *The Letters of Robert Burns*, 2nd ed., 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), I:278; Patrick Scott, "An Unrecorded Early Printing of Robert Burns's Patriarch Letter," *Studies in Scottish Literature*, 38:1 (2012): 147-150.

³ The authors of the present article are grateful to the owner of the Dumfries manuscript, who wishes to remain anonymous.

Glasgow 4th May 1789.

Dear Uncle

These I hope will find you and
your conjugal yoke fellow in your good old ordinary
I am impatient to know if the Ailsa fowling be commone-
ed for this season yet. As I want 3 or 4 stones of feathers
and hopes you will bespeak them for me —

It would be a vain attempt for me to
enumerate the various transactions I have been engaged
in since I saw you last this know — I engaged in
in the smuggling trade & God knows if ever any poor
man's experience better returns — Two for one!!

But as freight and delivering has turned out so D — no
dear I am thinking about taking out a licence
and beginning in fair trade — I have taken a farm
on the banks of Nith, and in imitation of the old
Patriarchs get men servants and maid servants
flocks and herds and Beget son and Daughters.

Mr Samuel Brown
Ballochmole dilm.

Your Obedt Nephew
Robt Burns.

(Signed)

presence or format are useful clues as to date. For example, the Dumfries manuscript is headed as written from "Mosgiel," where the 1819 *Kilmarnock Mirror* and all editions from Cunningham in 1834 through to Ferguson in 1931 normalize to the standard spelling "Mosgiel."⁴ J. C. Ewing in 1939, based on a privately-owned transcript, preferred the otherwise-unrecorded spelling "Masgiel," otherwise unrecorded and perhaps a misreading of a for o by an inexperienced transcriber.⁵ Like all the earlier versions of the letter, the new manuscript carries the incorrect year, "4th May 1789;" this is the same erroneous year as Cunningham and Ewing report from the transcripts on which they had relied, though both modern editors, Ferguson and Roy, place the letter correctly, on internal evidence, as written in May 1788.⁶ Thirdly, the new manuscript reports the addressee's location as "Mr Samuel Brown/Ballochniel Miln," a detail present in the *Kilmarnock Mirror* version, but not reported by Cunningham, and Anglicized by Ewing to "Balloch Niel Mill," a change presumably originating in the transcript he used, not by Ewing himself.

Such textual evidence might suggest that the Dumfries manuscript is one of the two now-untraceable transcripts used by Cunningham or Ewing, with the differences noted above being attributable to different editorial standards for handling headings and addresses. The textual variants within the letter show, however, that it cannot be the transcript used by Cunningham, and physical examination of the new manuscript shows that it cannot be the source used by Ewing. Ewing describes the manuscript he had used as "written on a quarto sheet watermarked '1816'," which was owned in 1939 by a Mrs Munro of Glasgow. Ewing also records that the variant address "Balloch Neil Mill" occurs on the verso of Mrs. Munro's copy, not at the foot of the letter itself, as in other sources.⁷

But Cunningham's and Ewing's were not the only reported transcripts to appear and then disappear. When G. Ross Roy was working on his edition of the letters in the 1960s and 70s, no manuscript evidence was

⁴ *Kilmarnock Mirror and Literary Gleaner*, 2:1 (June 1819): 18; Allan Cunningham, ed., *The Works of Robert Burns; with his Life*, 8 vols. (London: Cochrane and McCrone, 1834), VII:141; J. De Lancey Ferguson (ed.), *The Letters of Robert Burns*, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1931), I:221.

⁵ J.C. Ewing, "Letters of Robert Burns," *Burns Chronicle*, 2nd Series, 14 (1939): 6-10 [p.8], followed in Roy, as in n.2 above.

⁶ Roy notes "the 1789 date ... is impossible" (Roy I: 278n.).

⁷ J.C. Ewing, "Letters of Robert Burns," p.9.

available, and he had to rely on Ewing's published text, which was evidently better than Cunningham's. Fifty years earlier, though, De Lancey Ferguson had incorporated readings from a "MS. copy in the possession of Mr. George Shirley, Dumfries," a manuscript source apparently different from Mrs. Munro's copy used by Ewing.⁸ There are substantial differences between Ferguson's text and the MS copy which has now resurfaced in Dumfries (as for instance in the opening line, where Ferguson reads "in your good old way," not "in your good old ordinary"). Ferguson's source-note suggests that he had first prepared a text that relied on Cunningham and then was only able to add in a few readings from Mr. Shirley's manuscript that Shirley sent to him, rather than seeing Shirley's manuscript for himself, so the absence from Ferguson's text of some variants from the new Dumfries MS cannot be taken as indicating that it was not Ferguson's source. The other differences between the Dumfries MS and the Ferguson edition, in the place-name spelling and in the year, are explicable as Ferguson's silent emendation of what he saw as errors in the transcript. There is no continuous evidence of provenance from George Shirley to the present owner, but it is quite possible that the Dumfries manuscript is the one that supplied Ferguson's corrections to Cunningham.

This leaves the crucial issue of the possible relationship of the three early texts (Dumfries, *Kilmarnock Mirror*, Munro/Ewing) to each other and to the long-dominant Cunningham text. The collation below lays out the differences of wording among these sources, together with variants from Ferguson, showing his intermixture of variants from the Shirley source with the Cunningham version. As noted above, the Roy edition follows Ewing and is not separately collected here.

Mosgiel *Dumf.*] Masgiel *Ewing*; Mossgiel *KM, Cunn., Ferg.*

4th May 1789 *Dumf., Ewing, KM, Cunn.*] 4th May, 1788 *Ferg.*

in your good old ordinary *Dumf., Ewing, KM*] in your good old way
Cunn., Ferg.

commenced *Dumf., KM, Cunn., Ferg.*] Comenced *Ewing*

3 or 4 stones *Dumf., Ferg.*] three or four stones *KM, Ewing, Cunn.*

and hopes *Dumf., Ewing*] and hope *KM, Ferg.*; and I hope *Cunn.*

vain attempt *Dumf., KM, Cunn., Ferg.*] vain attemp *Ewing*

enumerate *Dumf., KM, Cunn., Ferg.*] ennumerat *Ewing*

this know *Dumf., Ewing*] but this know *KM, Cunn., Ferg.*

⁸ Ferguson, as in n. 4 above, I:221.

the smuggling trade *Dumf., Ferg., Ewing*] a smuggling trade *KM, Cunn.*

& God *Dumf., Ferg*] and God *KM, Ewing, Cunn.*

two for one!! *Dumf., KM, Ferg.*] two for one *Ewing, Cunn.*

has turned *Dumf., Ferg., Ewing*] have turned *KM, Cunn.*

So D---nd dear *Dumf.*] so D---md dear *Ewing*; so ***** dear *KM*; so dear *Cunn., Ferg.*

the banks of the Nith *Dumf., KM, Ewing, Ferg.*] the borders of the Nith *Cunn.*

flocks *Dumf., KM, Ewing*] and flocks *Cunn., Ferg.*

ob^{nt} *Dumf.*] Obed^t *Ewing, Ferg.*; obedient *KM, Cunn.*

Robt Burns *Dumf., Ferg.*] Robert Burns *KM, Ewing*; R.B. *Cunn.*

Ballochniel Miln *Dumf., KM*] Balloch Neil Mill *Ewing*; *not present in Cunn.*

In most regards the three early versions agree in the major variants; it is with the Cunningham version that the major changes are introduced. Among other substantive variants, the new Dumfries MS and the Ewing text share the oral verb form "hopes," which has the air of authentic transcription from the Burns original, even though the Ewing transcript, unlike Dumfries, tidies up the rest of the syntax in the same passage. The idiosyncrasies of spelling in the Munro-Ewing version ("Masgiel," "atemp," "ennumerat") might be interpreted as signs that it derives directly or at one remove from a carelessly or hastily written Burns original, but a more likely explanation might be that they were a slightly over-elaborate show of being scrupulous by a nineteenth-century transcriber who had difficulty with Burns's handwriting or the handwriting in an intermediate transcript such as Dumfries; all are in fact plausible misreadings of the Dumfries MS. itself. While the collation above does not include all variation in punctuation and spelling, in general the Dumfries MS is lighter in the use of dashes than the Ewing version, more closely resembling the punctuation in the *Kilmarnock Mirror*. Interestingly, Dumfries and Ferguson (like the *Kilmarnock Mirror*), print "two for one!!" with double exclamation marks, where Ewing just has a dash, supporting the possibility discussed above, that the readings Ferguson got from Mr. Shirley of Dumfries did in fact derive from the new Dumfries MS. A provisional explanation of the variants in the collation is that the new Dumfries MS was the source for the *Kilmarnock Mirror* and for the variants Ferguson introduced into Cunningham's text, and that Cunningham's normalized and bowdlerized text derives not from manuscript but from the *Kilmarnock Mirror*. Ewing's

source, though carefully transcribed, may have been independently made from Burns's missing original, but it could equally well be a nineteenth-century transcription from the Dumfries MS.

If this analysis is accepted, the new Dumfries manuscript dates from before 1819, when the *Kilmarnock Mirror* version was published. Until now, three distinct manuscript sources have been recorded for the letter—Cunningham's, Munro/Ewing, and Shirley/Ferguson. None of the three is in Burns's hand, none has a known transcriber or date for the transcription, and none has been available for modern scholarly inspection. The newly-discovered Dumfries manuscript is the only early transcript known to be extant. Cunningham's long-suspect text can be confidently set aside, as lacking independent authority, and Ewing's rather odd version, from an equally mysterious missing source, no longer provides the sole alternative to Cunningham. Short of the reappearance of Burns's original letter, the Dumfries MS is now the earliest and best of the available sources for the "Patriarch" letter.

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